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ABSTRACT

The practice of using basal readers as the main source of reading instruction has become a controversial issue in recent years. Several negative aspects of this practice have been cited, including: (1) a focus on isolated skill development or abstract parts of the reading process; (2) a failure to recognize individual learning styles; and (3) a failure to emphasize reading for pleasure. Many suggestions have been offered to improve reading instructional programs, such as using "real books by real authors," adapting teacher training to current knowledge on how children learn best, and changing the current assessment of reading competence. Because of the uniqueness of students, both basals and "real books" have a place in the reading curriculum. Prospective reading teachers should have a rich background in children's books, child psychology, and reading instruction. In-service help should always be available to teachers as they try to put this knowledge into practice. (MM)

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Basal Readers or "Real Books": A Discussion

Susan Partridge

Abstract

This paper is addressed to the current controversial issue, the questioning of basal readers as the main source of reading instruction. Many organizations of note, the IRA and the NCTE among them, have become seriously involved in the issue and have made known some of the negative aspects of the sole use of basals. They include too much attention to isolated skill development or abstract parts of the reading process, little attention to individual learning styles and too little attention on reading for pleasure.

"Real books by real authors", teachers' recognition of the uniqueness of children and designing instructional programs accordingly, parental involvement, adapting teacher training to current knowledge on how children learn best and changes in the assessment of reading competence are among the many suggestions offered for improving reading instructional programs.

It is felt that, at this point, the intent is not to recommend "real books by real authors" instead of basals but to include them in reading instructional programs.

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Basal Readers or "Real Books": A Discussion

Susan Partridge

Recently a substantial number of articles questioning basal readers as the main source of reading instruction in U.S. elementary schools have appeared in reputable educational periodicals. The issue is controversial, and has prompted many organizations and many individuals of note, concerned with improving education, to take a stand. At its winter meeting, January 31 - February 2, 1988, the IRA Board of Directors (5) approved a statement regarding "Literature Based Reading"; the statement follows:

> Literature must be the foundation of the language arts curriculum. Therefore the Board of Directors of IRA endorses the replacement of worksheet activities requiring little reading and writing with the reading of and writing about fiction and nonfiction literature. IRA should seek professional development programs designed to help teachers incorporate literature into their reading programs, and should promote the development of special institutes and seminars, Gertrude Whipple Professional Development programs, publications, council activities and convention programs to assist classroom teachers in developing literature based reading programs.
>
> The Board of Directors requests the president to appoint an ad hoc committee to develop an action plan related to literature based reading.

Robert Rothman (8) reported that the National Council of Teachers of English "urged schools to break the strong grip basal readers have on reading insturction and allow teachers to put 'real children's books by real writers' into the heart of the curriculum." He quoted the commission as reporting, "More than anything else, the basals are built around control. They control

reading; they control language; they control learners; they control teachers."

"If there were evidence that this tight control was necessary to the development of reading, then we might grudgingly tolerate it," the report continues.

"But the evidence from recent theory and research is that reading, like all language only develops easily and well in the context of its use. Simply speaking, we learn to read by reading, and there is precious little reading in the basal programs."

David Elkind (3) feels that we "miseducate" preschoolers and put them at risk when we give them formal instruction rather than "a rich and stimulating environment that is, at the same time, warm, loving, and supportive of the child's own learning priorities and pacing."

Elkind mentions several concerns about reading instruction, recently expressed in a joint statement of concern by a group of national organizations involved in elementary and early-childhood education; the statement follows:

> Many pre-1st-grade children are subjected to rigid formal pre-reading programs with inappropriate expectations and experiences for their level of development.
>
> Little attention is given to individual development and individual learning styles.
>
> The pressures of accelerated programs do not allow children to be risk takers as they experiment with language and internalize concepts about how language operates.
>
> Too much attention is focused upon isolated skill development or abstract parts of the reading process, rather than upon the integration of oral language, writing, and listening with reading.
>
> Too little attention is placed upon reading

for pleasure; therefore children do not associate reading with enjoyment.

Marie Carbo (1), who has worked extensively on learning styles, reports that thousands of poor readers whom she and her colleagues have observed, interviewed, and tested have exhibited global, tactile, and kinesthetic reading styles. Ms. Carbo explains:

> It comes as no surprise that many poor readers are predominantly global, tactile, and kinesthetic learners -- for that is precisely the reading style that seems to be accommodated least in U.S. classrooms. Unfortunately, many of today's poor readers are dropouts of reading programs that demand strongly analytic/auditory reading styles. Analytic students are part-to-whole learners. They can often master isolated skills that are presented in sequential fashion, they enjoy forming words from bits and pieces of phonetic information, they can easily recall details, and they like to work with puzzles and nonsense words. Youngsters with auditory reading styles are capable of discriminating among subtle differences in letter sounds, associating those sounds with letter shapes, and blending letter sounds quickly to form words.
>
> Instruction in phonics is undoubtedly beneficial for some learners, but the amount that is needed varies, depending on an individual child's reading style and preferences. Youngsters with auditory and analytic reading styles often require phonics instruction to become proficient readers; those with strongly global and visual reading styles, by contrast, may need little or no phonics instruction.
>
> Instructional approaches that virtually force students to learn through their reading-style weaknesses tend to produce failure, boredom, and loss of self-esteem, while approaches that capitalize on students' reading-style strengths tend to sharply increase their reading achievement.

The Dunns (2), who also have done a great deal of work with

learning styles, studied the related emotional, sociological and psychological factors as well as the environmental and physical and have found twenty-one elements to be considered in designing instructional programs for individuals.

In the sociological category, they have offered four elements for consideration: colleagues, self, pair and team. This indicates that some children prefer working alone and that others do better working with one or more of their classmates. Many articles containing personality profiles of computer programmers, seem in agreement that they are logical and introverted people and enjoy working alone.

In the emotional category, the Dunns have found motivation, persistence, responsibility and structure to be relevant; in the psychological, they have named analytical, global, cerebral dominance, reflective and impulsive. The need for order which Gaylord and Franklin (4) found is in keeping with structure which the Dunns found an important element to be considered.

The Dunns have also found important consideration in the environmental and physical categories: sound, light, temperature and design in the environmental; and perceptual, intake, time and modality in the physical. Obviously, parents can exercise control over many of these elements; therefore, their cooperation should be sought.

The Discussion

This discussion is based largely on decades of educational experience with an emphasis on reading and psychology and a continuing interest in reading research.

There are some children for whom structure is needed. Most teachers can relate to the following:

Miss Smith, you skipped page fifteen.

Miss Smith, we didn't have our spelling today.

Miss Smith, we forgot to sing "tiz of thee" this morning.

The mother of a young kindergarten child reported that he looked forward each morning to the opening exercise in school in which he "plugged legions" (pledged allegiance). "I have to plug my legions," he'd shout in glee as he left for school each day.

A young junior high student reported a teacher for veering from a workbook type exercise one day in favor of a less-structured activity.

Is there anyone who doesn't know some adults who live by structure? In some instances the structure is so great that it is felt that one could set one's clock accurately simply by observing the activity taking place.

The need for order and structure which Gaylord and Franklin and the Dunns found important elements to be considered were stated earlier in this report.

Carbo found that analytic students are part-to-whole learners who can often master isolated skills presented in a sequential manner, whereas those with strongly global and visual reading

styles may need little or no phonics instruction.

Throughout the decades, case after case of marked improvement with extremely reluctant readers was noted when "a real book by a real author," in keeping with the student's interests, and a respect for his/her learning style were used in the instruction.

Unfortunately, a lot of remedial reading instruction observed throughout the decades was of the "more-of-the-same" type. Children were "drilled" on a specific skill which a number of them eventually acquired. However, in many cases, the skill mastery was accompanied by a poor self-esteem and a dislike of reading.

Good children's librarians know children's books, but, in the main it is the readers who frequent the library. Experience has taught that there are teachers who do not know children's "real" books well enough to carry on stimulating and challenging discussions with children wanting to share with their teachers their enthusiasm for a particular story, expecting a little enthusiasm in return, only to receive disappointing remarks such as "How nice!" and "That's interesting."

Heretofore, basal readers have received the most attention in teacher training. It is sincerely believed that "real" books, too, have a definite place in reading instruction and that this behooves those concerned with teacher training to see that teachers know children's books and know how to use them in instruction.

The use of "real" books might increase a desire to read. Often good readers have been seen doing workbook exercises of

questionable value to them when they could be enjoying a good book and developing a fondness for reading which could very well continue into adulthood and make "becoming a nation of readers" a reality, not just a wish.

Parental cooperation should be sought as their contributions can be invaluable. As a matter of fact, in a small survey conducted by Partridge, S. it was found that twenty-nine of the thirty people questioned, all selected at random, reported that they like to read and that they do read beyond what is required of them. This covers all the categories concerned in the survey of students and service personnel at a prestigious university: an age range from twelve (Talent Identification Program) to the early fifties, the American born, members of the minority population, various ethnic groups, and various socioeconomic levels.

Twenty-one of the thirty questioned credited their parents with getting them off to a good start in becoming a life-time reader; two credited their grandparents; four credited themselves; two offered a combination of credit; and only one credited the school alone. Hopefully, the use of "real books by real authors" in reading instruction in our schools will make a change in credit ratings as listed above.

Many notable educators are not (at this point) recommending the use of "real" books instead of basals, but they feel that they should be included in the instructional programs. A number of them are sharing their knowledge with teachers as to how to go about doing this. One of many examples follows:

In the April/May 1988 issue of Reading Today, there is an announcement, by Learning Research Associates (6), of the Fourth Annual Reading Styles Conference to be held in Chicago July 6-9, 1988. Topics to be covered in the conference which is headed by Dr. Marie Carbo include how to:

Identify natural reading style strengths

Use the RSI floppy disk

Capitalize upon students' perceptual strengths and global/analytical styles

Increase the effectiveness of any basal reading series

Order and create needed materials

Select unbiased reading tests

Adapt proven procedures to any district

Secure the support and involvement of staff and community

Inservice staff and determine budget needs.

Another announcement listing several workshops in different geographical locations was received recently from Learning Styles Network (7). It was accompanied by an announcement of three new products which are thought to be of interest to those using the Learning Styles Inventory.

Barbara Vitale (9), in her book, Unicorns Are Real, has offered a list of twenty-six observable behavioral characteristics displayed by many dominantly "right-hemispheric children" who are believed to favor the whole-to-part approach as opposed to the part-to-whole approach favored by the dominantly "left-brained."

She warns that not all will display all of the characteristics and that the children who are laterally balanced will, of course, display both right and left hemispheric characteristics.

In addition, Mrs. Vitale offers detailed screening devices as well as learning strategies -- all right-brained in their approach, as she feels that there are already enough left-hemispheric approaches in the school curriculum. The use of color, movement, imagery, sound and touch are found throughout the strategies offered, and holistic strengths are considered.

Numerous helpful articles concerning the use of "real" books, basals or both continue to be found in current issues of reputable educational periodicals. It is felt that a careful reading of these articles can be helpful in decision making.

Conclusions

It is concluded that because of the uniqueness of students, both basals and "real" books have a place in reading instruction.

It is further concluded that prospective teachers of children should receive a rich background in children's books, child psychology and reading instruction and that in-service help should always be available to them as they try to put into practice the knowledge so gained.

Implications

Both basals and "real" books have a place in reading instruction.

The uniqueness of the students should be the deciding factor in the books to be used in instruction.

Teachers should receive continuous help, as requested, in solving problems as they arise. Their requests should not be determined as weakness.

Parental help should be sought and encouraged.

Teachers should have much more voice regarding the job they're expected to do.

Educators should take advantage of all available help in implementing newer ideas (supported by research) in reaching all students in their reading instruction programs.

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